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Doctors' report claims: 'We no longer have free health care'

By Andrew Johnson

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Increasing numbers of patients are paying for private "top-up" treatments alongside NHS care, meaning the health service is no longer free, a report by leading doctors warns today.

The doctors have written to all three main political parties, and the Health Secretary Patricia Hewitt, outlining their concerns that the idea of a free health service is a "political mirage".

The study was written by three doctors, including Karol Sikora, professor of cancer medicine at Imperial College School of Medicine for the group Doctors for Reform, which has nearly 1,000 members, all working for the NHS.

It says that patients are developing "sophisticated approaches to purchasing upgrades to their care", including in key areas such as cancer and heart disease.

Publication of the report "Free at the point of delivery: reality or political mirage" comes the day after International Development Secretary Hilary Benn was heckled by union delegates as he tried to defend the Government's record on the NHS.

While politicians often claim care is free at the point of delivery "this mantra is now a political mirage", the report said. Doctors for Reform is urging a debate on future healthcare funding.

"Without reform to health funding, the use of 'top-up' payments is likely to increase due to the upwards pressure on medical costs, the limits to tax-financing and ... the increasing importance of consumer choice," the study said.

It blamed patchy provision of NHS services across the UK, long waiting times and varied quality. It also pointed to the falling cost of private treatments due to advances in technology and increased competition between different firms.

Professor Sikora said: "The current debate on healthcare funding is strikingly inadequate.

"Having to 'top-up' NHS care is a reality for many patients. But the political debate continues to perpetuate the mirage of a service completely free at the point of delivery. We must have a full and frank debate about the future of healthcare funding."

In the letter to Ms Hewitt, Shadow health secretary Andrew Lansley and the Liberal Democrat's health spokesman Norman Lamb, Doctors for Reform set out three key questions.

It asked: "Can the NHS guarantee a universal service in future, given that it does not today?"

"Should doctors inform patients of 'top-up' options as part of their general duty of care?"

"How can access to healthcare be made equitable, given that neither NHS care nor the current 'top-up' payments meet that criterion?"

Christoph Lees, a consultant obstetrician and maternal-foetal medicine at Addenbrooke's Hospital in Cambridge, added: "While welcoming patients' ability to enhance their care by choosing different parts of a package of care from the NHS and private sectors, we must recognise that this approach may disenfranchise those unable or unwilling to pay for 'top-up care'.

"There is no point pretending ['top-up'] charges don't exist. We would ask the Department of Health to clarify its position regarding the interaction of 'top-up' payments with NHS care."

A Department of Health spokeswoman said: "We will never change the values of the NHS - universal, tax-funded, free at the point of need."

International Development Secretary Hilary Benn was barracked at Unison's Health Workers conference in Brighton yesterday with claims that the NHS was facing a crisis.

Mr Benn said he did not agree, pointing to increased investment and thousands of extra nurses.